European Journal of Politics and Gender • vol 1 • no 1–2 • 167–83
© European Conference on Politics and Gender and Bristol University Press 2018
Print ISSN 2515 1088 • Online ISSN 2515 1096
https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15272520831229

RESEARCH

Nudges for gender equality? What can behaviour change offer gender and politics?

Georgina Waylen, georgina.waylen@manchester.ac.uk
University of Manchester, UK

This article explores what behaviour change, with its associated methods, approaches and policy prescriptions, can offer gender and politics. After outlining the key elements of behaviour change, it considers the potential of its associated methods, primarily field experiments. The third section considers the potential contribution of behaviour change approaches by examining one area – social norms – that has recently become more salient for gender and politics. Finally, it examines behaviour change's gender equality policy implications ('nudges'). It concludes that despite significant problems, a critical, pluralist and problem-driven gender and politics scholarship should engage critically with behaviour change while remaining aware of its limitations.

Key words behaviour change • gender • gender equality • nudges • field experiments • norms

Key messages
- A pluralist, heterodox and critical gender and politics scholarship should explore the potential of behaviour change.
- Methods associated with behaviour change, particularly field experiments, can provide some important insights.
- Behaviour change approaches, particularly around social norms, can yield important insights.
- Behaviour change policy prescriptions (nudges) are a useful addition to gender equality measures.

To cite this article: Waylen, G. (2018) Nudges for gender equality? What can behaviour change offer gender and politics?, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, vol 1, no 1-2, 167-83, DOI: 10.1332/251510818X15272520831229

Introduction

Since the early days of gender and politics research in the 1970s and 1980s, huge strides have been made towards ensuring the recognition of gender as a category in political science (Lovenduski, 2015). However, significant challenges persist. Many subfields remain relatively gender-blind, and female political scientists cluster in certain areas,

most notably, comparative politics. Women are more likely to use qualitative methods, while men (either singly or in groups) publish disproportionately in top journals as quantitative methods become ever-more dominant (Shames and Wild, 2017; Teele and Thelen, 2017). There is no consensus among gender and politics scholars about a response to these challenges – how far should they utilise these approaches, or just not try to 'fit in'? Contributing to these debates, this article considers what one increasingly influential – but, until recently, largely male-dominated and gender-blind – approach in political science can offer gender and politics scholars.

Spreading out from economics and psychology, behaviour change (BC)[1] has grown in importance over the last decade. Research and policy measures (popularised as 'nudges') informed by BC have impacted on many social science disciplines and increasingly on political scientists, as demonstrated by BC's place in Obama's White House and UK central government, and Richard Thaler's recent Nobel Prize for Economics. However, until recently, most BC work rarely considered how its research or policy prescriptions were gendered. At the same time, even in the US, most gender scholars, including gender and politics scholars, remain largely immune to BC's influence. Furthermore, until now, the implications of BC for gender and politics scholarship have not been systematically considered. Indeed, for some, concurring with critics in disciplines like geography and development studies, 'nudges' are another evil incarnation of the neoliberal policy agenda of deregulation and privatisation (Leggett, 2014).

However, gender and politics scholarship has a long tradition of pluralism and heterodoxy, using a range of approaches and methods, including quantitative as well as qualitative techniques, drawn from various disciplines (Siim, 2004). Many gender and politics scholars advocate problem-driven research, choosing the method to fit the question being asked (Ackerly and True, 2014; Lovenduski, 2015). Much gender and politics scholarship is also 'critical', wanting to find solutions to the 'problem' of gender inequality in intersection with other forms of inequality (Waylen, 2007). In this spirit of methodological pluralism, the starting point of this article is that gender and politics scholars should critically engage with BC approaches to see whether they can help us better understand and change the world by informing method, approach and policymaking.

This article is therefore the first analysis of what BC, its associated methods and its policy prescriptions can offer the gender and politics subfield. To critically evaluate approaches and policies arising directly or indirectly from BC, the analysis draws on key behaviour change scholarship in several disciplines, as well as policy documents and grey literature produced by policy-focused BC organisations, such as the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and Ideas42.[2] The article is divided into four sections. After outlining BC's key elements, the second section considers the potential of the methods used by BC. The third section considers how BC approaches might contribute to the politics and gender subfield by examining one area – social norms – central to BC that has recently become more salient for gender and politics scholars analysing informal institutions. The final section examines BC's gender equality policy implications (including 'nudges'). For each area, the article considers whether BC can contribute new questions/approaches or policies, or just provide improved/different or additional ways to answer old questions or to implement existing policies. It concludes that despite problems, gender and politics scholars should critically engage as BC can provide additional analytical and methodological

tools for research and policymaking. However, at the same time, gender and politics scholars should be aware of BC's limitations, including the narrowness of its questions and methods, and a lack of consideration of power and the larger structural dynamics that detract from its utility.

What is behaviour change?

The roots of BC approaches are very different to much gender and politics scholarship, and particularly qualitative research using in-depth quasi-ethnographic methods. Behavioural economics (BE), now the most important intellectual component of BC, bridges the psychological and economic analyses of individual decision-making that lie at BC's core. BE starts with the rational actors of conventional economic theory but then adds the elements that often undermine actors' capacity to act in ways predicted by the models of rational self-interested individuals used by classical economists. BE recognises that individuals do not always make decisions based on unbounded rationality (eg saving for their pensions), do not always act with unbounded willpower to resist poor choices (eg eating unhealthy food or smoking) and are not always driven by unbounded selfishness (they are often concerned about fairness) (Thaler, 2017). It asks, for example, what happens when individuals have a self-control problem, are overconfident or have irrational expectations, and it argues that, for a more accurate view of human behaviour, economists have to factor in the systematic biases, norms and habits that affect individuals (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). BE is therefore not trying to destroy or replace conventional economics, but attempting to make it more realistic by taking behavioural factors seriously (Thaler, 2015).

This view of actors' decision-making processes has huge implications for methods, approaches and policymaking. If people do not always behave as the rational actors beloved of many economic models and theories, their actions have to be investigated empirically rather than predicted from assumptions of rationality. Behavioural economists, together with social psychologists like Kahneman, Amos and Tversky, pioneered the use of concepts like loss aversion (people care much more about losses than equivalent gains), status quo biases (people will often prefer the status quo even if it is suboptimal) and endowment effects (people overvalue something they own) to explain how systematic psychological biases cause people to act in ways that diverge from pure 'rational self-interest' (Kahneman et al, 1991). Investigating the norms, systematic biases and habits affecting individuals' behaviour is therefore crucial (Thaler, 2017). To do this, BC, like most economics and psychology, emphasises the importance of gathering data, testing hypotheses and establishing causality in order to show exactly how these factors affect behaviour. Its preferred method is experimental, primarily through the randomised controlled trial (RCT), a method initially pioneered in medical science.

These assumptions underlying BC/BE have significant implications for public policymaking. If people do not always behave as 'rational actors', policy based on this premise may not have the effects hoped for by its designers. However, public policies designed with a more realistic view of human behaviour can work with or counteract systematic biases, norms and habits that might, for example, stop individuals from exercising or saving even when they want to. Using the insights from BE and social psychology, Thaler and Sunstein (2009) pioneered the 'nudge', namely, altering the institutional architecture in ways that facilitate individuals making different choices.

In 'libertarian paternalism', individuals are still free to make choices as rules do not forbid certain behaviours, but policy 'nudges' counter systematic biases. Changing the default is perhaps the most successful and most powerful nudge, as demonstrated by auto-enrolment for pensions, in which individuals are free to opt out but the default measure of auto-enrolment produces significantly higher levels of pensions saving than schemes relying on individuals choosing to 'opt in' (Thaler, 2017).

BC approaches and policies have been criticised from all directions. From the political Right, and primarily in the US, nudges have been criticised for their excessive paternalism as they detract from individuals' freedom to choose; however, at the same time, social democrats, particularly in Europe, argue that nudges are insufficiently overt or statist, often being used as a substitute for state action in a era of state retrenchment and austerity (Halpern, 2015: 304). For critics on the political Left, BC approaches are still too individualistic, ignoring important structural factors and power dynamics within society that shape individuals' behaviour. As a result, BC approaches are seen as compatible, even complicit, with neoliberal policies designed to individualise citizenship within the market.

Within academia, while philosophical critiques of BC have focused on ethical issues around the restriction of choice and freedom, the most effective structural critiques of BC have come from development studies. In their analysis of the BC-inspired 2015 World Development Report, Fine et al (2016) argue that BC interventions potentially reinforce the structures that have helped to generate the problems, such as poverty and inequality, that the interventions are designed to combat as these are caused by structural constraints not individual choices. Poor health, for example, is a result not simply of bad individual choices, but also of structural inequalities. Overall, although many feminists and gender scholars share BC's scepticism about the rational actor model, for them, despite BC's emphasis on systematic biases, it also exhibits a number of problems (Pykett, 2012). Its focus on supposedly gender-neutral individuals is gender-blind and insufficiently concerned with unequal gender power relations that have structural origins. Until recently, BC has rarely promoted gender equality nudges or asked whether women and men might be affected differently by nudges. Given these critiques, we explore what BC can offer gender and politics scholars, starting with the methods utilised in BC research.

What can methods associated with behaviour change offer gender and politics?

For BC scholars and policymakers, an experimental approach is the best method of gathering data to give an accurate understanding of the different factors that influence human behaviour in any given context. In contrast, many gender and politics scholars – not just constructivists, but others, often using qualitative methods and relying on observational techniques to amass data – do not consider experimental methods as appropriate for their research. However, all forms of experimental methods – laboratory, survey and field – are becoming increasingly popular in the social sciences. For advocates, the key advantage of experimental methods is that they can firmly establish causality, in marked contrast to observational methods of data collection (Baldassari and Abascal, 2017). Economics and psychology – historically, the social sciences that have used experiments most frequently – favour laboratory experiments.[3] In BC scholarship, field experiments are the dominant methodological tool, seen

as giving a more realistic indication of how people (rather than students!) actually behave in the 'real world' outside the artificial setting of the laboratory, providing the bridge between the lab and naturally occurring data in the 'real world' (John, 2017).[4]

For BC, field experiments facilitate the development of rigorous causal claims as they can deliberately and effectively test causal propositions and hypotheses, and therefore yield more compelling evidence about real-world behaviours as a result (John, 2017). The presence in RCTs of control as well as treatment groups can show conclusively what happens both with and without the particular intervention being studied. Advocates claim that field experiments can overcome some of the problems of other experimental methods. They are more generalisable and have greater external validity than laboratory experiments (Baldassari and Abascal, 2017). Three main advantages result: they can generate new data in their efforts to establish facts; they can engage with theorists through their testing of formal models; and they can provide policymakers with robust data to support any policy claims (Druckman et al, 2011). However, problems with field experiments remain. For example, in practical terms, it is harder to ensure consistency of treatment in field experiments, so experiments need repetition and replication before results are believable.

Is there anything specific that field experiments can offer to gender and politics scholars? Despite their ubiquity in economics and psychology, experimental approaches only started becoming popular in political science in the last two decades (Grose, 2014). King, Keohane and Verba did not mention experiments in their classic methods text in 1994, but Gerber and Green's pioneering 'Get Out The Vote' experiments were key in increasing their acceptance (Druckman et al, 2011). However, although now more widely undertaken in political science, experiments – and field experiments in particular – are only just beginning to make inroads into gender and politics scholarship (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu, 2011). To evaluate the utility of field experiments for gender and politics scholars, we examine two areas of research where they have contributed to analyses of women's descriptive and substantive representation, seeking to uncover both the factors affecting women's participation in politics, and the impact of increases in women's descriptive representation on women's substantive representation.[5]

First, economists (many of them associated with the Adbul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]) have conducted extensive field experiments on gender quotas that have been primarily disseminated in economics journals. As a result, their research evolved largely separately from the more qualitative gender and politics quota scholarship. Much early work used the natural experiment of reserved seats for women in certain districts in India (a third of seats were randomly reserved for women from the mid-1990s). It showed that they had a significant impact on both women's descriptive and substantive representation. After 10 years of reserved seats, women were more likely to stand and win in areas that had had reserved seats in the previous two elections (Beaman et al, 2009), and girls' aspirations increased more in districts with reserved leadership positions for women on village councils (Beaman et al, 2012). Village councils headed by women were also more likely to provide public goods such as drinking water that particularly benefit women, thereby enhancing women's substantive representation (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

Significantly, with the increasing acceptance of experimental methods in political science, recent research (such as Clayton's (2015) field experiment on quotas in

Lesotho) influenced by this earlier work is now being published in political science journals. However, some results have been more equivocal than the India work. Beath et al's (2013) analysis of a development programme with gender quotas in 500 villages in Afghanistan found that while female participation in some social, economic and political activities, such as mobility and income generation, increased, women's roles in decision-making in the household or more general attitudes to women in society did not change.

A number of, predominantly US-based, political scientists have used field experiments in the study of gender and recruitment, selection and voting in the US to show what factors really make a difference. Investigating how to increase the number of women candidates for office, Jessica Preece and colleagues explored getting more Republican women to become delegates to a state nominating convention in one Republican state. Local Republican Party leaders were sent one of four letters to read out at precinct-level caucus meetings (Karpowitz et al, 2017). The letters varied between those with no mention of women and those stressing the importance of women as delegates (namely, the control and treatment groups). They found that different wordings could significantly increase the supply of and demand for women delegates, findings with concrete implications for strategies to increase women's political participation (Preece, 2016). Other recent field experiments have tested whether vote share is affected if a candidate is openly gay in a small-scale local election, finding that it was not among democratic voters (Niven and Panagopoulos, 2016). Furthermore, in their field experiment on the earliest stages of the supply pipeline, Kalla, Rosenbluth and Teele (2018) investigated differences in mentoring, sending 'student' letters to politicians asking for advice about entering politics in order to see whether responses varied according to the sex and race of the 'student'.

Given that data produced using field experiments are now used in some gender and politics scholarship, it is important to determine their potential for gender and politics scholars, even though little has been written about the utility of experiments for the subfield.[6] With its focus on causality, this method of data gathering will not find favour with all gender scholars, and particularly with constructivists, who focus their analyses on the framing of ideas and the construction of discourse and meaning, rather than causal relationships (Lombardo and Kantola, 2017). However, the majority of gender and politics scholars do make causal claims, even if they use predominantly qualitative methods and observational data. For example, much of the gender and politics literature seeking to explain the adoption and impact of quotas in different contexts takes this form. Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) show how gender quotas in Argentina impacted on women's substantive representation in two ways – both on process by changing the legislative agenda, and on outcomes through an analysis of the adoption of women's rights legislation – by examining the introduction of a Women's Rights Bill in Congress, using both quantitative and qualitative data. However, field experiments and RCTs enable gender and politics scholars to produce data and develop and test some causal claims in ways that other methods cannot. In particular, they can demonstrate what makes a difference, through random allocation and the use of controls, showing that any differences in outcomes are due to the intervention, something that observational research can struggle with, and this can be done without adhering to a rational actor model.

However, only certain, narrowly focused, causal questions are amenable to investigation through field experiments, with limits to scalability and generalisability.

As Nancy Cartwright (2012: 316) points out: 'it is a long road from an RCT which evidences the fact that a policy works somewhere to the prediction that it will work for us'. Bigger questions, for example, around the explanations for the success or failure of women's movements in achieving their gender equality goals in different contexts, such as transitions to democracy or why some states introduce more gender-just policies, are less amenable to experimental approaches in either single cases or larger comparative studies (eg Hassim, 2005; Htun and Weldon, 2018). To counter the critique that field experiments can only investigate restricted questions, with a limited conception of what counts as evidence, and produce only limited kinds of causal explanations as a result, Deaton and Cartwright (2016) argue that RCTs should be used in concert with observational methods. Paluck (2010) also advocates an 'experimental ethnography' in which experiments are brought together with qualitative work as part of a larger research strategy. Using this approach, Jessica Gottlieb (2016) argues that to fully understand why fewer women than men participated in a civic engagement course in Mali, she had to complement her field experiments with qualitative research in the form of interviews and focus groups.

In the spirit of heterodoxy and methodological pluralism, gender and politics scholars therefore need to consider whether they can combine field experiments with observational data and qualitative techniques, but without positioning either one as superior (or necessarily having to embrace BC approaches). Field experiments can generate new data to help to answer some important causal questions already preoccupying gender and politics scholars, but they are often better at showing what happens, rather than exploring why it happens (namely, 'what works' rather than 'why it works'). This focus on whether, rather than why, an intervention is effective can result in rather a-theoretical scholarship that does not contribute to theory building.

What can behaviour change analyses offer gender and politics scholars?

To answer the question of whether BC can offer gender and politics new approaches and analyses, we explore one area that is central to BC, as well as gender and politics. BC sees social norms and systematic biases as central to understanding human behaviour, and for gender scholars, of course, these norms and systematic biases are fundamentally gendered. However, despite recognising their importance, many gender and politics scholars still lack the requisite tools and knowledge of the construction and operation of gendered informal rules and norms, and, crucially, of how they change and can be changed (Waylen, 2017).

Recently feminist institutionalist (FI) scholars have considered how gendered norms, as a key component of informal institutions alongside informal rules and practices, operate (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). Given that informal rules and norms around gender are so pervasive, persistent and powerful, and are often sticky and difficult to shift, this undertaking is also particularly important for efforts to promote gender equality. FI has become increasingly interested in the 'hidden life' of institutions, uncovering how gendered informal institutions construct and influence behaviour, such as in political recruitment and selection procedures (Bjarnegard, 2013; Kenny, 2013). A better understanding of informal norms and practices can help to explain why policy change/formal rule change does not always have intended effects. The impact of gender-friendly formal rule change, like quota laws, for example, can

often be undermined by the continuation of informal norms and practices that run counter to the new formal rules.

As we have seen, social norms are also central to BC approaches (and scholarship in attendant disciplines like social psychology). As BC starts from the premise that if humans are not always rational utility-maximising actors, it becomes essential to understand the factors, such as biases and norms, that have such a powerful influence on behaviour. As a consequence, BC research – often through field experiments – has examined how norms are constructed, operate and can change, producing potentially useful insights for gender and politics scholars.

First, BC research has investigated precisely what norms are, something that gender and politics scholars are still uncertain about. It makes a distinction between two types of social norms that impact on behaviour: descriptive (or empirical) norms 'characterize the perception of what most people do'; and injunctive norms 'characterize the perception of what most people approve or disapprove of' (Cialdini et al, 1991: 203). Bicchieri (2017: 35), bringing these elements together, defines a social norm as a 'rule of behavior that individuals prefer to conform to because they believe most people in their referent network conform to it and that they believe most people in their referent network believe they ought to conform to it'. Significantly, then, adherence to norms is not necessarily a result of individuals' own beliefs. The key factor is what individuals believe others do, or what they believe they ought to do. People conform to a (descriptive) norm if they think others do, as confirmed, for example, by the hotel towels experiment, where guests were more likely to reuse their towels if they believed that other guests were already doing so (Goldstein et al, 2008). As Cialdini et al's (1990, 1991) experiments with littering show, descriptive norms can be more powerful than injunctive ones when they run up against each other as people are more likely to do what they think others actually do (and therefore descriptive and injunctive norms need to be aligned).

Changing norms is therefore as much, if not more, about changing people's perceptions of what others already do or believe in, which then impacts on their own behaviour, rather than fundamentally changing people's underlying beliefs.[7] Using this relatively malleable conception of norms, BC scholars show how norm change can happen. First, norms about certain behaviours, such as recycling or paying taxes, can be changed by ensuring that people have realistic and accurate information about others' behaviour if they, or others, are mistaken about it (Cialdini, 2003).

Second, the introduction of new formal rules can affect norms, but not for the reasons that gender and politics scholars might expect. Tankard and Paluck (2017) examined how the US Supreme Court decision in June 2015 establishing same-sex marriage as a constitutional right impacted on people's views (or their views of others' views) about same-sex marriage. Their surveys, conducted before and after the Supreme Court decision, found that although individuals' personal opinions stayed the same, their perceptions of others' opinions changed almost immediately. People now thought that their fellow citizens were much more supportive of same-sex marriage, but the only change between surveys was the new ruling of a public institution (Tankard and Paluck, 2017).

Third, the media can impact on social norms. Paluck and Green (2009) demonstrated how the mass media can shape norms of what is and is not acceptable. In a field experiment, a radio show containing themes of toleration and reconciliation was broadcast in one region of Rwanda. It affected the perceptions of what was

socially acceptable, in comparison with perceptions in other regions where different radio shows did not include these themes. Paluck and Green (2009) conclude that changing perceptions of what is normal, rather than necessarily changing underlying beliefs, can reduce discrimination, but only in certain contexts. In a field experiment combined with a natural experiment in Mexico, Arias (2016) found that listening to a radio soap that included content to promote gender equality socially with others impacted on people's views of gender equality, which did not happen if they listened to the show privately.

Fourth, critical actors can play an important part in norm change. Although gender and politics scholars have long emphasised the role of critical actors in achieving formal rule or policy change, particularly in the legislature, they have looked less at their role in norm change (Childs and Krook, 2009). For BC, the actions of an authority figure can impact on people's perceptions of norms of behaviour. For example, Kevin Munger (2017) investigated counteracting violent, hateful norms on twitter in a field experiment on the sanctioning of individuals' use of racist slurs in their tweets. Using twitter bots, he found that sanctioning by a high-follower white male (ie someone who appeared influential) significantly reduced the use of racist slurs in their subsequent tweets. Bicchieri (2017) has identified the characteristics of actors most likely to take the lead in norm transformation. 'Trendsetters' who transform norms have a: low sensitivity to the norm (ie are not convinced by it); low sensitivity to risk; low risk perception (for that norm); and high autonomy and sense of self-efficacy (Bicchieri, 2017).

However, although the relative malleability of norms (or the perception of those norms) means that a new leader, media or legislation can have a transformative signalling effect, according to Sunstein (2017), it can also lead to social change resulting from the unleashing of hitherto hidden social preferences (or beliefs). This unleashing can have negative as well as positive impacts. Sunstein (2017) cites an experiment about people's willingness to support an anti-immigrant stance in Trump-supporting states before and after the 2016 presidential election. Before Trump's election, significantly more people would only support an anti-immigrant organisation on condition of anonymity. However, after Trump's election, people were far less concerned about anonymity, no longer feeling that they had to hide their preferences in the face of a powerful new signal, namely, Donald Trump.[8]

This BC scholarship can provide politics and gender scholars with new insights into how gendered norms operate and how perceptions of others' behaviour and beliefs can be altered, including by critical actors, helping to establish new norms around gender equality. However, these BC approaches are still very centred on the analysis of individuals. For example, even in her discussion of leaders of the US civil rights movement, Bicchieri (2017) focuses primarily on individuals' characteristics, largely abstracted from the movement that they were part of. Alongside this, BC lacks a sustained and explicit consideration of power, except for some recognition that certain individuals (such as white men with many Twitter followers) will be more influential, and so implicitly more powerful. For a fully gendered analysis, it is necessary to consider the structural roots of power relations that, for example, position some white men as powerful.

What can behaviour change offer gender equality policies?

Having assessed the utility of methods like RCTs and explored how BC approaches can give different understandings of crucial mechanisms like social norms, this section explores whether BC can provide new ways of thinking about gender equality policy design and implementation. As already demonstrated, the key characteristic of nudges is that they are 'liberty preserving approaches that steer people in particular directions while preserving choice' (Sunstein, 2014). They do not forbid certain actions, but alter the institutional choice architecture surrounding people. Adherents argue that nudges can never replace laws or formal rules, nor are they intended to. Nudges are an additional policy tool, so despite important effects in some policy areas, they are limited. John, Sanders and Wang (2014) show that policy interventions using descriptive norms can produce up to a 10% change in the targeted behaviour. As nudges can never be a universal policy panacea, their possibilities and limitations need to be evaluated.

Nudge advocates argue that as nudges are simply a tool, their content is not predetermined. Policy priorities are decided by those implementing them – most immediately policymakers, but ultimately, in a democracy, by the citizens themselves. There are no goals or outcomes inherent in these techniques. Sunstein, for example, argues that although nudges are used effectively by anti-abortion campaigners, they can also be used by pro-abortion campaigners. Anti-abortion campaigners often protest with shocking pictures of aborted foetuses, while pro-choice campaigners can, for example, promote norm change by mobilising prominent women to talk publicly about their own experiences of abortion. The content, as well as the mechanisms, of any policy measures/policy goals should therefore be transparent and subject to democratic debate.

To date, most gender equality policies have relied not on nudges, but on formal rule changes forbidding certain actions, such as discrimination or unequal pay, implicitly assuming that adoption will be relatively straightforward. However, these measures have not always had the impact that policymakers intended. Laws, for example, forbid gender-based discrimination, yet it continues, often sanctioned by informal norms and practices. It is important to determine whether nudges can supplement formal rules and laws around gender equality when they fail to produce the desired changes, for example, by simplifying procedures to make it easier to report incidences of harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, given that gender equality policy issues vary hugely – ranging from problems that can be fixed relatively easily to those that seem very intransigent and resistant to change – it is also necessary to consider whether 'nudges' can only be used for certain policy issues.

While the early nudge literature did not consider gender or gender equality in any systematic way, BC scholars are now fully exploring the impact of nudges for gender equality policies – primarily around de-biasing employment practices (Bohnet, 2016). In 2017, new gender equality programmes, building primarily on the implementation of BC measures to counter gender bias in promotion and hiring in the workplace, were established in Australia and the UK (Bohnet and Klugman, 2017). Integrating this work with 'classic' nudge literature, this article now examines whether some common BC policy measures, particularly around norms and norm change, can be utilised in gender equality policymaking to suggest measures both to enact and to avoid.

As the previous discussion implied, there are multiple ways to alter the choice architecture to either counter biases or to work around how people are known to behave. Sunstein (2014) has outlined the 10 most common nudges with a good track record. Some nudges, like warnings (eg about risks associated with certain behaviours), are relatively small and easy to achieve; while others are more challenging to implement. For the BIT, simplicity and ease of implementation are the two key characteristics of a successful nudge. In the interests of space, we will examine four. Three have definite, but limited, potential for positive gender change, and the final one has a more open-ended capacity to engage 'hard to tackle' gender equality issues.[9]

First, disclosure policies can be a highly effective check on public or private entities and can inform the actions of consumers (eg around the real costs of credit cards). Publishing gender rankings or audits, whether for numbers of women in legislatures, in political parties or on company boards, can prompt organisations to take action to avoid bad publicity or looking worse than their competitors. In July 2017, the disclosure of the salaries of the highest earners in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) caused a furore, including protests by female BBC employees earning less than their male colleagues in the same or equivalent jobs. As a result, the BBC promised to tackle the gender pay gap that had been unintentionally revealed (BBC, 2017). Gender pay gap reporting requirements for larger organisations should reinforce this trend.

Second, pre-commitment strategies (rather than subsequent naming and shaming) can have a positive impact. If people and organisations commit in advance to certain actions, they are more likely to adhere to these goals, particularly if a precise timeline is specified (Thaler, 2015). This nudge can be effective in increasing women's descriptive representation. Implemented in this way, soft targets for women candidates adopted by political parties can have some success, as the UK Conservative Party has shown. However, as critics have argued, their effectiveness often does not bear comparison to properly designed and implemented formal measures, such as quotas.

Third, simplifying or altering the wording of communications can impact significantly on behaviour. One of the most-cited examples is the increase in tax revenue that a redesign of letters from tax authorities can illicit (Halpern, 2015). Gendered examples include altering job adverts to ensure that women are not put off applying and removing riskier elements like negotiating salaries. Moreover, the experiment on Republican neighbourhood selection meetings showed how changing the wording of communications can impact on the numbers of women standing (Karpowitz et al, 2017).

Finally, perhaps the potentially most important nudges for gender equality are those that use social norms. If we acknowledge that gendered norms – whether descriptive or injunctive – affect behaviour, then utilising or changing norms is central to gender equality efforts. Furthermore, this may be particularly relevant to those 'intractable' gender equality issues that are not resolved by formal rule change, particularly if informal norms and practices continue to undermine the efficacy of the formal rule change. BC advocates claim that behavioural design can change these socially shared definitions of appropriate behaviour (Bohnet, 2016). There are several ways of utilising social norms to target descriptive norms, but changing injunctive norms is much harder (John et al, 2014).

Descriptive norms can be altered by eliminating errors around inferred behaviour, and particularly the behaviour of individuals that the target group identify with, as the

example of guests reusing hotel towels demonstrates. People also often overestimate the prevalence of certain behaviours, such as crime in their local area, and levels of sex and drinking among students. However, it is important to avoid the 'big mistake' of making the undesirable behaviour appear overly commonplace as this can 'normalise' and thus legitimate it, for example, drawing attention to the extent of environmental theft in a protected area in an attempt to reduce it (Cialdini, 2003). So, rather than highlighting the number of top companies that have no or very few women on their boards, it is more effective to highlight how many do (Bohnet, 2016: 247). This approach could be extended to intractable policy issues like gender-based violence. Highlighting its prevalence – rather than emphasising how many are not perpetrators or reinforcing injunctive norms against it – risks normalising it.

Furthermore, the policy implications of the work cited in the previous section on authority figures implies that it is important to use examples both of people like those whose behaviour the intervention is trying to change, and of role models to influence target groups. So, for example, opinion formers who perpetrators can identify with – potentially including some powerful males who speak out against violence against women and sexual harassment or call out unacceptable behaviour – may have more impact on them. Mobilising critical actors, of all genders, is therefore crucial in efforts to change gender norms as well as policy. Prominent women, including many female Hollywood stars, played an important role in raising the profile of the recent 'me too' movement contributing to norm change. However, it is widely recognised that more involvement by male critical actors is also needed to change gender norms, whether, for example, by speaking up against sexual assault, challenging the division of labour in the household or refusing to take part in all-male panels.

However, problems with policy options often attributed to BC have emerged. Evidence shows that interventions like anti-bias training can have adverse unintended consequences and promote stereotype activation by drawing attention to those issues, creating moral licensing and defensiveness (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). Backlash has also been reported where measures are perceived as a zero-sum game (eg in appointments or candidate selection), and Bohnet (2016: 253–4) cites examples from India and Bangladesh where measures to increase women's economic independence resulted in an increase in male violence (which again highlights the issue of male power as many of these measures, although seen as threatening by men, do not fundamentally undermine structurally unequal power relations). More research is therefore needed to determine the scope of nudges for different gender equality policy areas.

Conclusions

This article considered what BC can contribute to gender and politics scholarship and, in particular, to a key task: developing better understandings of the world in order to change it. First, it showed that methods, primarily field experiments, associated with BC, currently used only infrequently by gender and politics scholars, do have the potential to generate new data and new ways of establishing causality. They have enabled economists to find examples of 'what works' in improving descriptive and substantive representation. There is therefore scope for gender and politics scholars to engage more with these methods, regardless of whether they embrace BC approaches more generally. However, because of their limitations, the methods

should be combined with observational and qualitative data gathering, particularly for theory building.

Second, existing BC scholarship offers gender and politics scholars new insights that they can utilise in their research, and because of BC's acknowledgement of the role of norms and systematic biases, without adopting a rational actor model. For example, BC analyses of norms and systematic biases can improve gender and politics scholars' understanding of the informal rules, norms and practices that are so important in maintaining gender orders and undermining positive gender change but still so little understood. Third, these BC methods and analyses can also help the development of more effective policy interventions around gender equality. These can include relatively simple, easy, one-off measures such as disclosure and altering interview techniques, or potentially more difficult interventions to challenge and change gender norms, including by critical actors. More research is now needed in this area.

However, this does not mean that BC approaches are without problems for gender and politics scholars. Despite their focus on systematic biases, they are overly individualised; as a result, structural power is missing from their analyses. A critical engagement with, rather than wholesale adoption or blanket dismissal of, BC is preferable. In concert with qualitative research, methods associated with BC, such as field experiments, can improve data gathering and analysis in gender and politics research. BC can also provide additional policy techniques and instruments, particularly in the tricky area of social norms. However, on its own, a BC approach is insufficient as gender and politics scholarship needs to consider power and structural dynamics in its frameworks and policy prescriptions in ways that BC cannot. BC is therefore a useful addition to the repertoire of a heterodox and methodologically pluralist gender and politics subfield that should be open to new methods and approaches, including those from other disciplines.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council under Grant UIC-295576.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the European Research Council, who supported this research through Advanced Grant 295576-UIC: 'Understanding Institutional Change: A Gender Perspective'. I would also like to thank everyone at the Women and Public Policy Program in the Kennedy School, Harvard University, where I was a Fellow in 2016/17 researching this article, as well as all those who gave me helpful comments on earlier versions: the participants at the Gender Research Workshop, Harvard, April 2017; the European Conference on Politics and Gender Conference, June 2017; the Birkbeck Gender Seminar, December 2017; Tiina Likki (BIT); and the two anonymous referees.

Author biography

Georgina Waylen is Professor of Politics at the University of Manchester, UK. She has recently completed a five-year European Research Council Advanced Grant on Understanding Institutional Change: A Gender Perspective. She is a co-director of

Feminism and Institutions International Network and her publications include *Gender and informal institutions* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017) and *Engendering transitions* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Notes

1. There is no universally agreed term. Alternatives include a behavioural insights approach, or the application of behavioural science to policy.
2. The BIT (or 'Nudge Unit') was set up in 2010 by Prime Minister David Cameron in the centre of UK government to consider how BC approaches could impact on government policy. It is now a social enterprise with offshoots in other countries (see: http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/). Ideas42 is a not-for-profit organisation that was spun out of research at Harvard University (see: http://www.ideas42.org).
3. Albeit in slightly different ways, for example, deceit is acceptable in psychology but not economics, whereas payment as part of highly stylised game-theoretic models is acceptable in economics but not psychology.
4. However, despite their differences, some claim that the rigid distinction between laboratory and field experiments should go as they lie on a continuum, varying according to their degree of 'fieldness' (Gerber and Green, 2012, quoted in Baldassari and Abascal, 2017).
5. In social science more generally, there are numerous experiments examining biases and discrimination in recruitment and promotion at work, particularly around race but also around gender.
6. Dolan and Sanbonmatsu (2011) is an exception.
7. However, there is some lack of clarity about relationships between norms and beliefs/perceptions among BC advocates. Some argue that BC is about changing behaviour through changing perceptions not norms, claiming that (injunctive) norm change will then follow, but the timescale is unclear (eg drink-driving and safety belts in cars).
8. The recent controversy about Harvey Weinstein's behaviour also highlights the role of changing norms around sexual harassment, as well as power.
9. This raises questions about whether nudges might only work for certain types of gender issues. Do some issues need measures that appeal to system one thinking (eg graphic warnings and default rules) or system two thinking (eg statistical information and factual disclosures)?

References

Ackerly, B, True, J, 2014, Method and methodologies, in G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola and L. Weldon (eds) *The Oxford handbook on gender and politics*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Arias, E, 2016, How does media influence social norms: experimental evidence on the issue of common knowledge, unpublished paper

Baldassari, D, Abascal, M, 2017, Field experiments across the social sciences, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 43, 41–73

BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), 2017, Female stars call on BBC to sort out the gender pay gap now, 23 July, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40696402

Beaman, L, Chattopadhyay, E, Duflo, E, Pande, R, Topalova, P, 2009, Powerful women: does exposure reduce bias?, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124, 4 1479–540

Beaman, L, Duflo, E, Pande, R, Topalova, P, 2012, Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: a policy experiment in India, *Science*, 335, 6068, 582–6

Beath, A, Christia, F, Erukolopov, R, 2013, Empowering women through development aid: evidence from a field experiment in Afghanistan, *American Political Science Review*, 107, 3, 540–57

Bicchieri, C, 2017, *Norms in the wild: How to diagnose, measure and change social norms*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Bjarnegard, E, 2013, *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

Bohnet, I, 2016, *What works: Gender equality by design*, Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press

Bohnet, I, Klugman, J, 2017, *Behavioural insights and gender equality: The second VicHealth leading thinkers residency*, Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

Cartwright, N, 2012, RCTs, evidence and predicting policy effectiveness, in H Kincaid (ed) *Oxford handbook of the philosophy of the social sciences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 298–318

Chappell, L, Waylen, G, 2013, Gender and the hidden life of institutions, *Public Administration*, 91, 3, 599–615

Chattopadhyay, E, Duflo, R, 2004, Women as policymakers: evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India, *Econometrica*, 72, 5, 1409–43

Childs, S, Krook, ML, 2009, Analysing women's substantive representation: from critical mass to critical actors, *Government and Opposition*, 44, 2, 125–45

Cialdini, R, 2003, Crafting normative messages to protect the environment, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12, 4, 105–9

Cialdini, R, Raymond, R, Kallgren, C, 1990, A focus theory of normative conduct: recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 6, 1015–1026

Cialdini, R, Kallgren, C, Reno, R, 1991, A focus theory of normative conduct: a theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behaviour, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24, 201–34

Clayton, A, 2015, Women's political engagement under quota-mandated female representation: evidence from a randomized policy experiment, *Comparative Political Studies*, 48, 3, 217–38

Deaton, A, Cartwright, N, 2016, *Understanding and misunderstanding RCTs*, NBER Working Paper no. 22595, Cambridge, MA: NBER

Dobbin, F, Kalev, A, 2016, Why diversity programs fail, *Harvard Business Review*, July/August

Dolan, K, Sanbonmatsu, K, 2011, Candidate gender and experimental political science, in J Druckman, D Green, J Kuklinski and A Lupia (eds) *Cambridge handbook of experimental political science*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press

Druckman, J, Green, D, Kuklinski, J, Lupia, A, 2011, Experimentation in political science, in J Druckman, D Green, J Kuklinski and A Lupia (eds) *Cambridge handbook of experimental political science*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press

Fine, B, Johnston, D, Santos, A, Van Waeyenberge, E, 2016, Nudging or fudging: the World Development Report 2015', *Development and Change*, 47, 4, 645–63

Franceschet, S, Piscopo, J, 2008, Gender quotas and women's substantive representation: Lessons from Argentina, *Politics & Gender*, 4, 3, 393–425

Gerber, A, Green, D, 2012, *Field experiments: Design, analysis and interpretation*, New York: WW Norton and Co

Goldstein, NJ, Cialdini, R, Griskevicius, V, 2008, A room with a viewpoint: using social norms to motivate environmental conservation in hotels, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35, 3, 472–82

Gottlieb, J, 2016, Why might information exacerbate the gender gap in civic participation, *World Development*, l86, October, 95–110

Grose, CR, 2014, Field experimental work on political institutions, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17, 355–70

Halpern, D, 2015, *Inside the Nudge Unit: How small changes can make a big difference*, London: WH Allen

Hassim, S, 2005, *Women's organizations and democracy in South Africa*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press

Htun, M, Weldon, L, 2018, *The logics of gender justice: State action on women's rights around the world*, New York, NY, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

John, P, 2017, *Field experiments in political science and public policy*, London: Routledge

John, P, Sanders, M, Wang, J, 2014, The use of descriptive norms in public administration: a panacea for improving citizen behaviours?, http://ssrn.com/abstract=2514536

Kahneman, D, Knetsch, J, Thaler, R, 1991, Anomalies: the endowment effect, loss aversion and status quo bias, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5, 1, 193–206

Kalla, J, Rosenbluth, F, Teele, D, 2018, A field experiment on gender, ethnicity and political self-starters, *Journal of Politics*, 80, 1, 337–41

Karpowitz, C, Monson, Q, Preece, J, 2017, How to elect more women: gender and candidate success in a field experiment, *American Journal of Political Science*, 61, 4, 927–43

Kenny, M, 2013, *Gender and political recruitment: Theorizing institutional change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

Leggett, W, 2014, The politics of behaviour change: nudge, neo-liberalism and the state, *Policy and Politics*, 42, 1, 3–19

Lombardo, E, Kantola, J, 2017, *Gender and political analysis*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Lovenduski, J, 2015, *Gendering politics, feminising political science*, Colchester: ECPR Press

Munger, K, 2017, Tweetment effects on the tweeted: experimentally reducing racist harassment, *Political Behavior*, 39, 629–49

Niven, DC, Panagopoulos, C, 2016, Does candidate sexual orientation matter at the ballot box?, paper presented at APSA Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, 1–4 September

Paluck, E, 2010, The promising integration of qualitative methods and field experiments, *Annals of the American Academy of Politics and Social Science*, 628, 59–71

Paluck, E, Green, D, 2009, Deference, dissent and dispute resolution: an experiment to change norms and behavior in Rwanda, *American Political Science Review*, 103, 4, 662–44

Preece, J, 2016, How to elect more women: gender and candidate success in a field experiment, presentation at WAPPP, Kennedy School, Harvard University, 20 October

Pykett, J, 2012, The new maternal state: the gendered politics of governing through behavior change, *Antipode*, 44, 1 217–38

Shames, S, Wild, T, 2017, Gender, diversity and method in political science, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 50, 3, 811–23

Siim, B, 2004, Towards a contextual and gender sensitive political science?, *European Political Science*, 3, 2, 97–101

Sunstein, C, 2014, Nudging: a very short guide, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 37, 583–8

Sunstein, C, 2017, Unleashed, unpublished manuscript, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3025749

Tankard, M, Paluck, E, 2017, The effect of a Supreme Court decision regarding gay marriage on social norms and personal attitudes, *Psychological Science*, 28, 9, 1334–44

Teele, D, Thelen, K, 2017, Gender in the journals: publication patterns in political science, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 50, 2, 433–47

Thaler, R, 2015, *Misbehaving: The making of behavioral economics*, New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co

Thaler, R, 2017, From cashews to nudges: the evolution of behavioral economics, Nobel Prize Lecture for Economics, Stockholm, 8 December, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej6cygeB2X0

Thaler, R, Sunstein, C, 2009, *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*, London: Penguin

Waylen, G, 2007, *Engendering transitions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Waylen, G (ed), 2017, *Gender and informal institutions*, London: Roman and Littlefield